

Book Reviews

Exotic Aliens: The Lion and Cheetah in India

Valmik Thapar, Romila Thapar, and Yusuf Ansari

Aleph Book Company, 2013

Reviewer: Simon E. Townsend

Researchers into the history of the introducing of large iconic predators beyond their established natural range have little in the literature to assist them. While there is a very great deal more information concerning the reintroduction of large predators to their historical range, especially in North America and Africa, it does not usually involve negative comment apart from livestock interests. *Exotic Aliens* by Thapar, Thapar, and Ansari however, is a departure from this and indeed has been seriously controversial, especially in India.

In essence this volume makes a contention that was at once bitterly received in some wildlife circles and at the same time very exciting in its novelty to those naturalists who attempt to gather evidence of 'out-of-place big cats' in other parts of the world. Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States all have very active researchers into this phenomenon. All three of the above authors researched historical data extensively in a quest to find records relating to the lion and cheetah existing in the Indian subcontinent beyond the time of the establishment of city states. Their suggestion is that as references to these two species earlier than this period are virtually non-existent, but those to the tiger are abundant, it is likely that lion and cheetah were introduced into the Indian subcontinent by way of trade and as gifts to potentates. These animals were considered worthy and valuable gifts and continued to be imported up until the time of Indian Independence.

Apart from this book's general interest and intelligent readability, it serves as a model for any researcher desiring to go into print. The notes and references used in the compilation of this book are extensive. They equate to the authors indeed making a good case. However the detractors, especially Asian lion and cheetah experts and serious supporters Divyabhanusinh Chavda and M. K. Ranjitsinh in 'Lion and Cheetah in India: A Critique' (*Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, 110(1), Jan-Apr 2013, pp 3-21) are damning. However that does not concern this review. What is of greatest import is that references are not just extensive but accurately interpreted. It removes some of the chance that a scholarly bunfight as above may not ensue if a budding researcher wishes to make a possibly controversial statement.

The book itself has a total of 304 pages, numerous black-and-white illustrations, and a series of gorgeous Mughal hunting scenes and some contemporary cheetah photographs in full colour as well which complements the text. As mentioned above, the bibliography is extensive and the notes and index are comprehensive and useful.

Out-of-place large felids by their very nature are the most likely to exist and be recorded of all large cryptids according to this writer. Perusal of *Exotic Aliens* has value to the researcher in its example of efficient, even ruthless, gathering and interpreting of records. This book deserves a place in the library of all serious cryptozoologists with a penchant for out-of-place big cats.

Panther Tales and Woodland Encounters: Seeing is Believing

Judith Victoria Hensley

2018 (Self-Published / CreateSpace)

Reviewer: Chad Arment

There is a vast wealth of cryptozoological data to be mined in the Appalachians. Regardless of whether any unrecognized beasts actually haunt those hills, there are plenty of stories about Bigfoot and other strange beasts, especially 'panther tales.' Sightings of big cats (cougar or black panthers, particularly) are common, yet there are very few purposeful efforts to collect, collate, and evaluate such stories. So, I was interested to hear that a Kentucky author/newspaper columnist had put together a book on the subject.

The book itself seems to be primarily made up of responses to a social media query the author posted regarding mystery cats in the Appalachians, with a few responses outside that area. (There are also submissions from a student folklore project.) As such, there is no follow-up or evaluation of the stories, they are simply presented ‘as is.’ (Some stories are as short as a sentence, others run a few pages.) Hensley notes at the end of the book that she is just a ‘story teller,’ and that these stories are not intended to be scientific evidence; the reader is left to make up their own mind on the subject.

As folklore, this is a very ‘broad stroke’ effort. There are some common folkloric motifs that crop up, such as panther screams that sound like a woman in pain, or evidence (photos) that disappears. From a folkloric standpoint, you can certainly determine that panther folklore is alive and well in the Appalachians. Beyond that, however, it’s distinctly a mixed bag for cryptozoology. Some accounts are frustratingly low on details. Some stories simply are on the lines of ‘I saw/heard a panther.’ There is also no attempt to sort sighting reports into regions. As anyone who investigates mystery cats is aware, it is very easy for eyewitnesses to mistake other animals for big cats (especially black ones). So, a witness may be perfectly honest in believing they saw a black panther, yet still be mistaken about what they saw. There’s no way to determine from these stories any level of reliability. At best, this book may point to regions where further research may be warranted. (Assuming the story in question actually give a location; some do, others don’t.)

This is one of those books that preach to the choir; if someone already believes that the big cats exist, they may add it to their library. It’s unlikely to convince anyone else. The book may be of interest for a small Appalachian library ‘local interest’ bookshelf, but there is so much more that could (and should) be done with interviewing witnesses that I don’t think I can recommend it for a serious cryptozoology library.

Meeting with Monsters: An Illustrated Guide to the Beasts of Iceland

Jón Baldur Hlíðberg and Sigurður Ægisson

JPV útgáfa, 2008

Reviewer: C. A. McCormick

Admittedly, this may be a very elusive book for U.S. readers. The review copy of *Meeting with Monsters* was, in fact, obtained in Iceland, specifically Egilsstaðir, on the shores of the ‘monster lake’ Lagarfljót.

Hlíðberg’s art is so fantastically well-realized that it makes the hunt for this distant book worth it.

The thirty monsters are depicted with a naturalist’s eye and have an inordinate attention to detail. For instance, the Hot-Spring Bird looks like it would fit right in to an ornithological volume . . . aside from the bony feathers on the wings and feet used to minimize contact with boiling-hot water! In another instance, the feet of the Water Horse are figured to demonstrate how they can be both adapted for swimming and appear ‘backwards’ to a more casual observer. This methodology pushes the work into the realm of ‘speculative zoology,’ but other creatures push it back into fantasy: cat/fox hybrids, unicorn-bears, and *two* island-sized beasts.

Other elements—apparent surviving plesiosaurians, arthrodiros, and archaic whales—are undoubtedly cryptozoological. The overall effect of the illustrations is far from a hodgepodge; they create the impression of a fantastical hidden world where mythology is colliding with reality. Ægisson’s text in *Meeting with Monsters* is largely concerned with re-telling the folklore and anecdotes, and explicitly avoids critical commentary. These pieces of lore would be totally unknown to the English-speaking world if not for this effort, which is really commendable. The artistic decision to avoid almost all commentary is perhaps the weakest part of this book. It would have been useful for readers if there was a paragraph at the end of some entries mentioning, for example, the connection between Shaggy Trout and *Saprolegnia* infections, or that the names of many of the whales have been connected to known species of cetaceans and pinnipeds. It is further odd that the ‘bloop’ sound phenomenon is mentioned in-text since, not only is it no longer regarded as mysterious, but it would seemingly break the tone the book was going for.

Any quibbles with *Meeting with Monsters* are truly minor; it is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in folklore, speculative zoology, or cryptozoology. The Skate Mother must truly be seen to be believed.